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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the creative use of information technologies to teach world theater in a course at Austin Peay State University (Tennessee). Compared with western theater, world theater demands a broader access to information than is generally available. The goal of the course is to compare various forms of theater using materials and human resources available only through technology. Students and faculty use e-mail, the World Wide Web, and distance learning venues to gather, research, and catalog world theater resources as well as to interview experts in specialized areas. Advantages and challenges encountered in teaching theater with new technologies are discussed. (Author/AEF)

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ED 400 804

Using Technology Resources to Teach World Theatre

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Abstract: This presentation discusses the creative use of today's technologies to teach world theater. Compared with western theater, world theater demands a broader access to information than is generally available. The goal of this course is to compare various forms of theater using materials and human resources available only through technology. Students and faculty use email, the world wide web, and distance learning venues to gather, research, and catalog world theater resources as well as to interview experts in specialized areas. The presentation includes a discussion of the advantages and challenges encountered in teaching theater with new technologies.

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Overview and Justification (Scott Boyd)

The original development, and the ongoing alteration, of this world theatre class came about out of a twofold necessity. First, the notion of teaching an upper division/graduate level course in world theatre simply cannot be done in a thorough manner when speaking of traditional teaching methods. Austin Peay State University, like many other institutions, has limited resources. Among these limitations are the number of faculty, the size of the library collection, and the overall firsthand experience and research in terms of world theatre. We needed to explore other venues to help us have better access to a wider range of information than our current resources.

Secondly, we at Austin Peay State University have begun to assemble the technology of tomorrow into a distance learning center to help us with the task of education today. While we have been using the technology in our distance learning classroom to tap into various resources on an "as needed" basis, we had never used it as the sole vehicle to research, gather, categorize, and disperse knowledge for a semester-long course. We had never really put the distance learning center to the test. The missing piece for each of these puzzles seemed to warrant a perfect match between the two. This was the starting point for the development of the course.

We decided to structure the class in a seminar approach as opposed to the more traditional lecture approach. By using technology resources, we would be receiving input from a variety of resources by way of several venues. This nonlinear gathering of information lends itself to a more fluid exchange of ideas instead of the disbursing of information along a one way venue. This format allowed for more hands-on work by the students in terms of exploring the many aspects of world theatre. It also created the opportunity to actively engage in technology resources as a means to a wider range of knowledge than is currently available in most traditional approaches.

One of the many side benefits to this course is the idea that our students are being trained in technology exploration as well as the practical use of the equipment. This benefit is not limited only to the research aspect of education, but also includes the presenting of ideas, theories, and conclusions. This is accomplished in a series of graded presentations. These presentations include summaries and bibliographies that are posted on a class listserv. Follow up questions and discussions also occur on the listserv. This brings us to yet another benefit. With this approach, we have virtually eliminated the paper aspect of this course offering. There is no textbook. There are no written tests. All written correspondence is accomplished by means of the class listserv.

The Class Itself

We began the semester by giving a brief overview of the equipment available in the classroom. After this overview, we then began a hands-on exploration of various world wide web sites. This allowed the students to get actively involved with the technology and learn quite a lot

through the trial and error of diving into the world wide web. This gave them that ever important, first hand experience of finding the various dead ends and misconnections that we all have encountered while exploring the internet.

After this initial surface exploration of the world wide web, we divided the remainder of the semester into four differing aspects of world theatre; spoken theatre, sung theatre, movement oriented theatre, and then various combinations of these. With each aspect, we briefly discussed our American theatre heritage to give us a starting point in our world theatre exploration. After this, we then began looking at various regions of the world to discover their heritage and to compare this to our own. Following this step, our students gave brief presentations on other elements, regions, and cultures in terms of world theatre that were not yet covered in class. Throughout these presentations, comparisons between their research and the research of others in the class were constantly being made. This enabled us to achieve a better understanding of our theatre heritage and its place in world theatre heritage. Dr. Jones will now discuss the various resources employed in this class approach.

Resources for World Theater (Ted Jones)

There were a number of technical exchange capabilities we wanted to explore for world theatre in this new environment. Related to technology, our goal as teachers was to remove ourselves from the information spotlight as "sages on the stage." The idea was to serve more as "guides on the side"--to help students explore world theater topics through technical resources. As theatre students are generally not technology oriented, nor are they particularly interested in technology, the challenge was to see how much of the technology would prove useful. We are fortunate in that theatre students are accustomed to working in what seem to be unstructured settings, as these are a necessary part of the creative aspect of theater. Their trust of their teachers and willingness to undertake being graded on how well they used these utilities is commendable. (Actually, we did lose a couple of less hardy souls who panicked after the first week.) The technologies used for the class include various email components, the world wide web, and the distance learning system we are using in this presentation for access to human resources not available on campus--our guest presenters. I would like to define each of these briefly as they relate to the course, give examples as they apply, and discuss how each application has proceeded thus far.

To begin, email and listserv. I think everyone here probably knows the basics of email; however, listserv may be less familiar, particularly as it is used in course work. In general, a listserv consists of a group of individuals joined via email to receive messages posted about a topic of mutual interest--in this case, the world theatre class at Austin Peay. It operates very simply. A message addressed to the listserv is automatically sent to all subscribers. Any reply to this message is also sent to everyone; and the messages are numbered, so it is easy to tell their order. The basic listserv function is to extend the classroom forum outside the time and space limitations of the class meeting itself. Thus, if time runs short and materials meant to be covered in class were not, they could be made available via the listserv. Bibliographic sources used by

students in their presentations are required, and these are distributed to others in the class via the listserv, along with project outlines and presentation notes. Comments, questions, and calls for help all make their way onto the listserv, along with some unanticipated postings. For example, after her first login, one student sent a test message in the form of an original poem she wanted to share with the class. The inevitable technical snafus result in pleas for assistance and responses from the more technically savvy listserv members. One unanticipated plus we discovered is that a large text file located on the world wide web can be emailed directly to everyone in the class by means of the listserv. One student came in a panic one day, needing to download a cyberspace interview with composer Stephen Sondheim to distribute to the class. He was amazed when I showed him how to call up the file and email it to the listserv. Students can then read and file the message or delete it as they desire--all without expensive paper copying, collating, stapling, and distribution.

Postings to the listserv have included exchanges on the relationship of life and art, recommendations of good web sites for particular playwrights, class assignments and discussion questions, guidelines for quoting electronic sources in a bibliography, point incentives for using the listserv, and even class input for this conference presentation. To date there have been more than 175 postings to the class listserv. Private email messages from the teachers to individual students are also used to make topic recommendations and to deliver grades and feedback on individual projects.

The world wide web, the internet with pictures, is available in our classroom and can be viewed via the monitors you are watching us on. In fact, you will hear some discussion of how students used the world wide web for presentations in just a few minutes. We were particularly interested in making the world wide web available to students, as we felt it would be an ever more vital resource for world theater and one we wanted our students to know how to use. The first presentation assignment was to find a world wide web site related to the arts in general and to demonstrate it for the class, noting the outstanding characteristics. It was during this first presentation that students found out how wonderful technology can be when it works and how disappointing when it doesn't work, or is slow. At present, the world wide web turns out to be a resource with more promise than substance as far as world theater is concerned. Commercial sites and academic sites are not distinguished from each other. So, a word search using the title of a play by British author Caryl Churchill may turn up well over 100 cites; but most of these are likely to be nothing more than billboard listings of the play as part of a theater's season. Other sites may have wonderful video clips (if you have the required software installed on your machine) and unique materials unavailable elsewhere. For example, we found a particular website on Kabuki theater contains an essay written by a Japanese actor specializing in female roles in Kabuki. Useful photographs, and a few interesting links that lead to related websites at the click of a mouse, are becoming more common. Information on the www is often quick to find but variable in content and quality; and, for the time being, the best and richest research is still to be done in the library.

This brings us to the technology that is connecting our two sites presently, the compressed video technologies used in distance learning. Originally this course was planned to connect our room with the distance learning room at Tennessee State University. One instructor, Scott Boyd, has taught at TSU in the theater department, as his wife does presently, and he lives in Nashville. They had agreed to pilot this class as an initial course shared between our two universities--something the Tennessee Board of Regents universities have not yet done. When this did not work out, I agreed to join Scott to teach the class here because of the interest students had indicated in such a course. Actually, as far as presentation goes, the technology works pretty much the same whether you have another site connected or not. It is in the interaction component that the other site becomes significant. To present their class projects, students learned the basics of camera selection, how to use a document camera to store digital slides and show photographs and www materials, and how to integrate the VCR. In fact, you will see a demonstration of some of these shortly in the form of an abbreviated presentation.

It is perhaps fortunate that our planned sharing with TSU did not occur when it was planned. Our particular room is operating on the leading edge of technology in that the phone lines connecting our two sites are not all Bell lines; once they reach the Austin Peay campus, they run through our campus phone switch. No one else is doing this at present. Sometimes when you "beta" test, the leading edge becomes the bleeding edge. The point is, we have had some technical issues to arise that are still under resolution, but now we are finally able to bring human resources in from distance locations to work with our students. Planned sessions include a presentation from TSU on African theater and a session on Alexander movement technique from Appalachian State University in North Carolina. A lecture on the carnival tradition in Trinidad is also being considered with the University of Memphis.

We have been able to benefit in the course from locally available expertise, however. The world theatre class has had guest lectures and demonstrations by five APSU faculty members and one visitor from Nashville. These have covered subjects from playwright Wendy Wasserstein to Chinese Opera and a demonstration lecture on Hindu dance. Besides offering students the benefit of each professor's expertise, we hoped to give our colleagues the chance to explore the technology briefly in a collegial environment.

We will now shift our discussion to a overview of how a student researched a presentation on sung theatre.

Billy Budd (Tanya Olson)

(This part of the presentation was accompanied with displays of web pages, digital slides of production photographs, and a brief video segment from the film *Billy Budd*.)

After receiving presentations on sung theatre by Dr. Jones, Prof. Boyd and guest faculty, students were to present projects on sung theatre as well. I chose Benjamin Britten's opera, *Billy Budd*, which was based on Herman Melville's novel. The first place I went to gather my

resources was the World Wide Web. The two most useful articles I found were on the novel and on a description of the set design for the opera. All I knew was that *Billy Budd* took place aboard an English warship. This second web site provided me additional information about the set, which was especially useful, as I could not find any pictures of the opera set.

After exhausting the Web sites, I searched the library for resource materials. There, I found the *Billy Budd* novel, play, movie, and opera score. Unfortunately, there were no recordings of the opera. I even looked at a couple of music stores, but came up empty handed.

With Britten's opera score and all the other resources, it was my task to combine these elements into a presentation on sung theatre. I had a lot of information to present; but the big question was, how could I present *Billy Budd* in a concise but thorough manner in a small amount of time. As "a picture is worth a thousand words," I took a very visual approach.

One of the key elements to understanding *Billy Budd* is its historical setting. By using *Harvard Graphics*, I designed a time line of what was going on in England during the late 1700s. This is how I began my presentation.

I then moved on to explaining the three main characters by showing pictures of them saved in a digital format. By using the zooming and focusing features, I saved the slides the way I wanted them to be presented. Saving the slides ahead of time not only saved me time during the presentation, it also avoided a distraction caused by zooming and focusing on the pictures during my presentation.

Finally, I completed my presentation by showing a clip from the videotape dealing with the court martial of Billy Budd. As the court martial was crucial to the story, showing my classmates this scene via video tied it to the visual approach of my presentation.

Overall, the new technology and in class seminars aided me a great deal in both research and presentation.

Views of the Students (Beth Duncan)

(The following comments were solicited and collected by one of the student presenters, Beth Duncan, from members of the class for purposes of this presentation.)

Advantages to this particular approach to teaching world theater:

Students have the opportunity to learn about technology while studying a subject they enjoy thus helping us to overcome technological fears. The new technology and access to the world wide web provide more resources and up to date information on world theater topics. The listserv allows students to develop interpersonal relationships with the instructors outside of the classroom and gives them the opportunity to expand upon topics discussed in class.

Students are able to hear from a variety of specialists in different areas such as Chinese Opera, Hindu Dance, and performers who have worked in specialized fields, such as opera. They also have the opportunity to draw on the knowledge, experience and interest of students in the class. For instance, one of the class members studies fight choreography and was able to present a session on stage combat during the movement oriented theater presentations. Two other students visited London during December, 1995 and were able to discuss their visits to London theaters.

The class gives students the opportunity to break away from the normal class structure and to be involved in the teaching and learning process.

Disadvantages to this approach:

Having never used computers or the internet before, many students felt intimidated by the equipment. Extra time has to be taken from the class to learn how to use the technology presented. Computer workshop days were suggested by almost all of the students from this class.

More technology means more possibilities for mistakes during presentations, such as pushing a wrong button or thinking all of the slides are saved and finding out in the middle of a presentation that they really are not. Another problem arises when needed world wide web sites are not accessible on a given presentation date.

In their presentations, students are required to use two means of technology. This means extra research has to be done in order to find pictures, videos, and web sites to present. Videos and pictures are not as easily found as written information. Extra preparation time is needed. Students have to plan to be finished with researching their presentations one day in advance in order to get into the distance learning room to set up and practice. Unlike regular speeches, which can normally be practiced anywhere, world theatre projects require the distance learning classroom equipment for preparation.

Being able to cover so many topics means the class doesn't delve into them very far. Some topics are explained in detail, while others are briefly mentioned.

Some students feel that questions and responses become overwhelming on the listserv. They feel that a small class is almost essential in using the listserv to its fullest potential. (Note: The instructors feel that as there is no text to read, most of the print material for the class is made available through the listserv. Therefore, the listserv postings replace the time normally used to read the text and are not an additional burden.)

Conclusion (Scott Boyd)

In conclusion, the decision to use technology resources to teach this course in world theatre gave us many possibilities as well as quite a few challenges. The immediate access to information and reference materials, both traditional and non-traditional, has proven to be an empowering tool for both the students and the faculty. Accessing print and graphic material from around the world with a few keystrokes is amazing. These possibilities, along with personal experiences from other experts of a given field, make teaching by way of distance learning an exciting reality. However, along with all of the wonderful facets to this approach, there are several challenges that need to be addressed.

We have experienced a few technical difficulties this semester. The most common problem is the inability to access web sites quickly for a given presentation. This has forced the various presenters to have a back up plan ready at a moment's notice. Another problem encountered was the inability to complete a video hook up with another site. This occurred when we were to receive a lecture by from Tennessee State University. Due to this technical error, we had to postpone the guest lecture and scramble to fill the class period with other material.

The largest hurdle that we've been crossing this semester is the organizational aspect of scheduling quest experts. As you well know, handling your individual schedule within the confines of your institutional schedule is difficult enough. Handling the schedules of several lecturers who all work within other institutional schedules and then trying to coordinate it all into one overall class schedule is a bit of a nightmare. The need for understanding by all involved in this project was of the utmost import. Our students are to be highly commended for their patience during this exploration.

Weighing the positive and negative aspects of the use of technology resources in the instruction of world theatre, one realizes that the small headaches and hurdles encountered during the journey are more than made up for by the wealth of knowledge just around the corner. The idea that students at a small liberal arts university have the potential for the same instructional resources that are traditionally found in some larger institutions makes the pursuit of this type of distance learning a viable and desirable undertaking.